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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ability and inclination of contemporary American family systems to allocate resources on a child-centered rather than an adult-centered basis. Specifically, the discussion considers whether the changing economic context of family life results in placing inappropriate demands for maturity upon children--albeit differently for affluent and low income families. The latchkey child phenomenon provides an illustrative case study of this issue. The increasingly "monetarized" nature of family households generates an internal economic climate in which children often appear to offer the only degree of freedom in allocating family resources. One result is pressure for a rapid assumption of self-care responsibilities. This analysis suggests two research questions. First, what is the life-span value of childhood as it has evolved culturally in the modern era? Second, to what extent are children being deprived of childhood in the name of the financial and psychic needs of parents? These lines of inquiry will illuminate the basic issue of whether or not childhood as we have known it at its best has become an unaffordable luxury for increasing numbers of American parents. (Author/RH)

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Can American Families Afford the Luxury of Childhood?

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Abstract

This paper examines the ability and inclination of contemporary American family systems to allocate resources on a child-centered rather than an adult-centered basis. It considers whether the changing economic context of family life results in placing inappropriate maturity demands upon children--albeit differently for affluent and low income families. The latchkey child phenomenon provides an illustrative case study of this issue. The increasingly monetarized nature of family households generates an internal economic climate in which children often appear to offer the only manipulable degrees of freedom in allocating family resources. One result is pressure for a rapid assumption of self-care responsibilities. The paper questions whether being "children without childhood" is in the best interest of children and society.

Can Families Afford the Luxury of Childhood?

Understanding social change in contemporary America is a tricky business, particularly when that change affects or emanates from "The Family." Changes in "The American Family" make good copy, and journalists are always on the alert for signs that family change is underway. The serious scholar concerned with the welfare of families often plays the role of assisting the public in deciding which of the journalistically reported changes in "The Family" are real, and which are simply media events based on selective and biased impressions, misinterpreted statistics, overblown clinical speculation, or overgeneralized conclusions drawn from unrepresentative data. As always, the role of the scholar is to raise the quality of public debate.

It has been left to demographically-oriented family sociologists to sort through the available facts and make sense of the "true history" of "The Family" in the twentieth century (e.g., Bane, 1976; Cherlin, 1981; Spanier, 1980). Others have wrestled with the issue of whether it is even proper to speak of <u>The</u> American Family in contrast to merely describing "families in America," with the former deductively emphasizing the divergence of specific families from a supposed historical or cultural norm, and the latter inductively focusing upon the empirical plurality of contemporary family forms as self-defined by the participants (Elshtain, 1982).

Over the course of the last five decades, social scientists who emphasized the childrearing functions of families were increasingly drawn into the journalistic fray as the issue of mothers in the labor force and children in day care centers moved to center stage. As Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) note in their review of work and family through time and space, the first generations of research focused on the reciprocal issues of employed mothers and unemployed fathers because these were the social problems as defined by the popular press and what investigators held to be the social realities of family life. As the decisions and actions of millions of mothers "normalized" maternal employment, however, the focus of research shifted to validating maternal employment, rather than exposing its adverse consequences. In recent years a more balanced perspective has emerged.

The 1980's have given birth to a new concern about families, a concern that we can identify with the question, "can families afford the luxury of childhood?" Writing in Newsweek in 1982, Joshua Meyorwitz asked "Where Have All the Children Gone?" He reported that the children he sees around him manifest interests, experiences, and language that seem more adolescent and adult-like than childlike. Patricia O' Brien entitled a Chicago Tribune article with the question, "Dope, Sex, Crime, What Happened to Childhood?" Marie Winn wrote a cover story for The New York Times Magazine entitled "What Became of Childhood Innocence?" The

article offered Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita as the norm for the child of the 1980s--sexual and knowing. Winn followed her article with a book entitled Children Without Childhood (1983) in which she developed this theme at length.

Vance Packard offered Our Endangered Children (1983), in which he created a vivid image of children being forced out of childhood by the pressures of divorce, remarriage, maternal employment, sexually and violently explicit mass media, and misguided educational institutions. Psychologist David Elkind has given us the most penetrating and scholarly analysis, under the title, The Hurried Child (1981). Like the others, Elkind worries that the adult world conspires to speed up the transition from childhood to adolescence, and in so doing creates excess stress and undermines the realization of true maturity in adulthood.

These are but some of the most public voices questioning whether forces are at work to deprive children of the full experience of childhood. However, the issue hinges upon the prior question of whether "childhood" exists as a concept apart from the collective experience of children. In this it parallels questions about whether or not it is legitimate to speak of "The Family" or merely "families." It depends upon whether or not it makes any sense to ask, "What is childhood?"

Childhood is as much a product of cultural evolution as it is of biological evolution (Aries, 1962), and it owes much of its definition and articulation to Rousseau's Emile. As it has

evolved, the essence of childhood has frequently had a critical cognitive dimension. For much of Western history it was believed that it was not until seven years that a child attained "the age of reason." More recently, Piaget and his followers have elaborated a much more complex series of qualitative changes in intellectual functioning in which attaining "formal operations" in early adolescence takes on a special maturational significance. This enhances the validity of childhood as a special period in the human life course. And it reinforces efforts to define childhood deductively, on an actively conceptual rather than passively empirical-inductive basis.

As an idealized conception of a period in the life course in the modern era, to be a child is to be shielded from the direct demands of economic, political, and sexual forces. In the modern sense, children have a special, non-contingent claim upon those who bear them, and they have a right to receive support from their families and their communities, regardless of their economic value. They need not pay their own way and earn their keep. Typically, families want to provide this support and as rule they will do so if possible. But when families cannot provide for their children, society recognizes some responsibility to pick up the tab. This deeply held principle gives moral force to ongoing efforts to eliminate poverty from the lives of children (Nelson & Skidmore, 1983). It also implies that children are not direct participants in the cash economy. If they work their income is mediated by

parents. If they make purchases as consumers it will be through their parents, except in the most small scale transactions.

Similarly, children are not fair game for political activity. They cannot vote, are not legally responsible, and are not expected to be used by competing political forces in the society. More broadly, children are expected to relate to adults on a direct person-to-person basis, not in the organized bureaucratic way that characterizes adult interaction. Getzels (1974) has referred to this differentiation as a "particularistic" versus a "universalistic" principle--an emphasis upon who one is rather than what one is. Childhood is a time to maximize the particularistic and minimize the universalistic, a message addressed to educators, politicians, and parents alike.

Finally, children are not supposed to be sex objects. In their behavior, their interests, their attitudes, and their bodies, children are to be asexual, for adults as well as for each other. As Elkind (1981) points out, in modern Western societies this principle used to be reinforced by the distinctly different clothing worn by children, clothing that differentiated them from adults and symbolized their being off-limits sexually (which is not to say that this principle was not violated). To be sure, children are physical and even sensual creatures, but, the overall character of childhood is to be apart from overt, genitally-focused sexuality (as Freud recognized in conceptualizing the "latency period"). As Finkelhor's excellent book Sexually Victimized Children (1979)

makes clear, children are not in a position, developmentally or socially, to give informed consent for sexual involvements. They lack the cognitive and affective equipment as well as the social autonomy necessary to meet the criteria implicit in a liaison between "consenting" adults.

If the child is shielded from economic, political, and sexual forces, what is childhood all about then? It is about creating social space in which to lay the foundation for optimal human development. It is to provide a culturally sanctioned context in which to bear the fruits of human evolution. The first aspect of childhood is play. The child is given a license to play, and in so doing explore the world. This play is distinguished from adult work in that it doesn't have production as its goal, although work can be an important activity for children. Child's play is distinguished from adult games in that it doesn't depend upon formal organizations, and from adult social life in that it isn't a basis for courtship. Children are shielded so that they can play, and this play is quintessentially human, as Jacob Bronowski (1973) so correctly recognized when he spoke of the human being's "long childhood" as a key to the ascent of man. As Bronowski saw it, childhood is both the cause and effect of cultural evolution.

The second fundamental concern for children is the development of basic competence. Children must become adept at the basic skills of the human community, in the areas of language, body control, morality, reasoning, and interpersonal relations. Unless

children become competent in these areas they are a problem--for their family, for our society, and for themselves.

Play and developing competence go together, of course. Comparative biologist Karl Groos led the way in arguing that play is "preparation for life" (Groos, 1901). For the child, play and the development of competence are at the top of life's agenda (White, 1959). For the family, they are the goal of socialization. For the community, protecting them is an important part of the social contract. This is childhood in the modern sense of the term, and it is a very worthwhile cultural innovation, one that has emerged over several centuries of cultural evolution. S. Johansson (1984) has reviewed the history of neglect, abuse, and avoidable death among children in Western societies from medieval to modern times. She documents the emergence of childhood demographically as infant mortality rates were reduced from hundreds per thousand to tens per thousand and the proportion of children dying before age five dropped from roughly 50% to about 10%. She also adds to the cultural story of how childhood as a valuable period in the life course established itself in Western consciousness (Aries, 1962; DeMeuse, 1974). The modern concept of childhood is a hard won cultural achievement, not to be discarded casually.

While few observers conclude that parents are <u>casually</u> discarding childhood, Elkind (1981), Packard (1983), and others do conclude that many parents are acting as if they believe they cannot afford childhood for their children. These observers cite

as evidence the premature granting of responsibility for self-care to young children and the extensive involvement of children in formal activities that mimic adult work, play, and sexuality, and make extreme maturity demands. Both trends stem from the modern socioeconomic context of childbearing and childrearing, albeit with different emphasis for the financially struggling and affluent segments of the population. While both rich and poor may be engaged in "hurrying" (to use Elkind's term), the form and nature of the demands differ somewhat.

The socioeconomic context of American families has changed in several ways. More and more of daily life has become "monetarized" (Giarini, 1980). Also, those transactions, goods, and services that are outside the monetarized sector of the economy have come under increasing pressure--particularly the massive amount of goods and services linked to women as homemakers, basic health care providers, and caregivers (Tinker & Bramsen, 1976). What is more, as this process has advanced, more and more of the increases in monetarized values are cancelled out by deductions in the non-monetarized sector or by the costs exacted to compensate for the "production" of those monetary values (Giarini, 1980). This occurs, for example, when one must purchase a swimming pool because the formerly "free" lake is now too polluted for swimming as a cost of increased industrial activity.

The same dynamic can apply to family households as well. More and more of the day-to-day transactions involved in maintaining a

household are cash transactions--as opposed to bartered transactions or labor-intensive activities. This is a global trend deriving from industrialization/urbanization dynamic that dominates modern societies and finds one of its expressions in the entry of mothers into the cash labor force (as both cause and effect). Mothers work outside the home to earn money--even if it is only 60% of what men earn. And, because mothers work outside the home they need more money to perform basic family functions. For example, eating becomes monetarized as parents substitute cash purchases (processed foods and eating out) for time-intensive food preparation. Recent data indicate that eating away from home now consumes approximately one-third of the family food budget--up from a fourth only twenty years ago. Also the cash costs of childrearing have increased: childbirth costs more, health care costs more, and recreation costs more, to cite but three examples.

An analysis by Olson (1983) concludes that the average middle-class two-parent family setting out to raise a child in 1980 can expect to spend about $140,000 (in 1982 dollars) to raise a child to age 22--about 22% of its income. Raising two children will cost 1.69 times as much as one child, and three children will cost 2.24 times as much as one. The estimate for a low income family (in the twentieth percentile of the income distribution) is about $70,000.

Compounding the cost of bringing up children is the "opportunity cost" to parents (mostly mothers) involved in bearing

and rearing them. Opportunity cost here refers to the cash labor force participation and hence the income foregone by the choice to become a parent. In practice, of course, this has been limited to women deciding to be mothers; fathers who forgo income to meet their parental responsibilities are still a rarity (Cherlin, 1984). The value of this investment depends upon how much time is involved and how much one could sell that time for in the marketplace. Because men virtually never forgo labor force participation for parenthood, these costs, and indeed the whole burden of accounting for these costs, are applied only to women under conventional circumstances. As Cherlin (1984) notes: "... family responsibilities tax the resources of women much more than men" (p. 432). Mincer and Polacheck (1974), for example, estimated opportunity costs for women in late 1960s to range from $8000 over 8.8 years for a mother with less than a high school education to $17,000 in 5.2 years for a mother with a college education. Using some different assumptions (and reflecting inflation) an Urban Institute study for the late 1970s estimated these figures at $17,000 and $60,000, respectively. These costs have risen in recent decades as opportunities for women have increased (Mincer & Polacheck, 1974).

As costs rise, an economic model of human capital investment predicts that children and childhood will become ever-more likely to be viewed as a luxury item in family accounting and decision-making (Becker, 1981). Affluent/elite women will respond

to the indirect costs and thus the threat that children pose to their career development and earning potential (which is now considerable, as is evident in the fact that 16% of wives now earn more than their husbands, with most who do so being college-educated professionals). Lower class, pink and blue collar women will respond to the direct costs of children in the face of their limited ability to generate income. And this, it seems, is what is happening. Survey evidence does indicate that few adults will forgo children entirely because of their high cost (Blake, 1979). Except in times of large-scale and long-term economic depression such as occurred in the 1930s, childlessness is not usually the response to rising costs and/or shrinking resources, although small family size is (Houseknecht, 1982). Ordinarily, people will bear children and then try to decrease the costs and increase the payoff of each child born. This is the "economic" solution to human capital decisions (Becker, 1981).

Like all micro-economic phenomena, this allocation of family resources takes place within the context of the larger socioeconomic order. The 1970s saw a growing socioeconomic polarization in the United States that may affect the day-to-day experience of children. As Thurow (1984) points out, the middle-class (defined as a household with an income between 75 percent and 125 percent of the median household income) declined from 28.2% of the population in 1967 to 23.7% in 1983. This decline resulted equally from half the affected households moving

up and half moving down on the income ladder. Similarly, households living in poverty rose by 28.2 percent (controlling for overall population growth) during the period 1979-1982, according to Census Bureau data (New York Times, 1984). The increase was particularly evident for families with children. We might expect that these socioeconomic changes would translate into differences in "hurrying." And this may be what we observe in the lives of children, particularly at the early ages, with the more affluent parents rushing children to prepare for future elite status, while economically struggling families rush children to release parents for work in the cash economy to make ends meet. This is not to deny that both forms of hurrying operate in each group, however, as we shall see.

Among the affluent, some observers see greater and greater pressure on children to yield dividends. As Elkind (1981) notes, Groos's principle that play is "preparation for life" has been transformed into the Montessori maxim that "play is the child's work." The result is stress and "hurrying." Many families are investing time, energy, and money in their children to produce a return on their human capital on an unprecedented scale. One writer (Stout, 1983) led an article on "Bringing Up Better Babies" as follows: "With computers and violins, in swimming pools and gyms, today's baby-boom parents are determined to help their children be the best they can be." For example, lessons and equipment (including computers) are major items in many family

budgets. Reppucci (1983) reports that the massive proliferation of organized sports and recreation for children has not been matched by research to determine what, if any, effect they have on speeding up the process of socialization.

However, some who have observed the process at work believe that this drive to greater and ever earlier payoffs increases the pressure on children to perform, to mature, and to succeed in ways that lend prestige to parents (Elkind, 1981). For example, success in school is of unprecedented importance (Garbarino & Asp, 1981), and parents and educators have raised their academic expectations for young children. Most teachers and parents expect children to be reading as they enter first grade (and often express concern about children who are not reading fluently by Christmas). Secondary school graduation has come to be defined as almost a prerequisite for full personhood in American society, and for the affluent, a college education is imperative. All this means kids are under greater pressure to pay off in academic skills than ever before.

The competition among affluent families for that success often appears to have the intensity observed among elite Japanese families (Arthur, 1983), who use the term Mama-gom ("monster mother") to describe this pressure-cooker environment. Many affluent parents appear to have concluded that play is a luxury their children can ill afford if they are to be successful. This is not totally new, of course. Survey evidence from an affluent

suburban community collected in the mid-1960s and presented in a filmed report entitled "16 in Webster Groves" revealed a high level of academic competition and stress among college-bound secondary students. What is new, it seems, is the widespread lowering of the age for this pressure and its diffusion among families.

These maturity demands are evident across the board, from the academic to the social, and in varying degrees across the socioeconomic spectrum. Divorce and dating or remarriage by parents, for example, demand interpersonal sophistication on the part of children at an early age, as the children must come to terms with their parent(s) involved in overt courtship. The glorification of the "sophisticated" lifestyle in the mass media appears to resonate with the more mundane facts of the matter. Most divorced women who are mothers of young children remarry, so most children of divorce experience parental courtship.

The net result of these trends appears to be that children have a greater sense of appreciation for the contingent nature of parental involvement. Are children hearing the message, "hurry up and grow up, I'm busy!?" One is tempted to conclude that many are, particularly in light of the 50-year follow-up to the classic Middletown study. Bahr's analysis (1978) repeated the questions posed to teenagers about their parents. In 1924, 63 percent of the female adolescents and 62 percent of the males reported that the most desirable attribute of a father is the fact that he spends time with his kids. By 1977, the figures were 71 and 64 percent.

In 1924, only 35 percent of the males and 41 percent of the females placed a premium on mothers who spent time with their children. By 1977, these figures were 58 percent and 66 percent. These data suggest that maternal involvement has become more problematic, and thus valued as a differentiating characteristic among parents. If maternal involvement has become the differentiating characteristic that paternal involvement has long been in modern society we can expect to find its dynamics being played out in the issue of child care arrangements, where the issue is who is responsible for investing time and energy in supervising and nurturing children. Because of a greater likelihood of squeezed financial resources among low-income families, shifting the costs of child care onto children themselves would seem to be an aspect of hurrying more common to low income rather than affluent families. However, and particularly at older ages (e.g., 9-12 year olds) the incidence of self-care may be high among affluent families too (Long & Long, 1983).

Consider two versions of the question underlying the emerging national debate over being a latchkey child (defined as a school-age child who is left in his or her own care or in the care of older siblings without direct adult supervision on a regular basis before or after school). One version asks: "Is it in this child's best interest for him/her to be left at home without adult supervision?" The other asks: "How long can I leave this child alone without his/her getting into trouble, being too upset, or

defined by others as 'neglected?'" The former emphasizes the needs of the child; the latter emphasizes the needs of the adult(s). A brief review of the latchkey child phenomenon suggests that the contemporary debate reflects these competing needs.

No one familiar with the topic disputes the general assertion that millions of school age children care for themselves, and perhaps younger brothers and sisters, on a regular basis after school, and sometimes before (Garbarino, 1981). There is, however, substantial disagreement on the basic issue of how old is old enough for self-care. Is a 13-year-old old enough? If the age range for being considered a latchkey child includes 13-year-olds, Lynette and Thomas Long (1983) "conservatively" estimate the number of latchkey children to be approximately six million. This works out to about 24% of the roughly 26 million children between the ages of six and 13, and 15% of the total number of children under 13 years of age. But a national survey of children conducted by the Foundation for Child Development in 1976 reported that fewer than 5% of the 4-11 year olds were latchkey children (Zill, 1983). This evidence suggests that many latchkey children are 12 or 13 years old or are younger children being cared for by teenage siblings. The numbers involved are large no matter how we look at it, but the difference in how we do look at it is significant. Is a 13-year-old at home without a parent a latchkey child or simply a teenager home alone? Is an 8-year-old at home with a 14-year-old

sibling a latchkey child or simply at home with a teenage babysitter? The answer, as any parent knows, is "it depends."

It depends upon how grown up the child is and how safe the home environment is. Many 11-year-olds can manage well in self-care, particularly if they are well-trained, have telephone access to adults, and live in a safe neighborhood. Few can do well if they lack basic skills, are responsible for younger siblings, or are isolated in an apartment behind locked doors in a dangerous neighborhood. The national debate on latchkey children has largely ignored such considerations of individual and environmental context (Galambos & Garbarino, 1983). There is little research on the topic, but what there is suggests that both the age of the child and the social character of the environment seem to play a significant role in defining the psychological costs and benefits of being a latchkey child. For example, Long and Long (1983) conducted research in the most threatening environments (urban apartments) and found disturbingly high levels of fear among latchkey children. However, a study by Galambos, conducted in a safe small town located in a rural farm country, revealed no such drastic negative consequences among the third and fifth graders studied (Galambos & Garbarino, 1983).

No one doubts that there are risks attendant upon being a latchkey child, particularly a young one in a frightening urban area (Garbarino, 1981). These include the risk of feeling badly (e.g., rejected, afraid, and lonely), acting badly (e.g.,

victimizing younger siblings, engaging in destructive behavior inside and outside the home), developing badly (e.g., having school adjustment problems, developing negative feelings about parents), and being treated badly (e.g., suffering accidents and sexual victimization). All these risks are real threats for many children. As Long and Long (1983) point out, "In many jurisdictions a third or more of all complaints received by child welfare agencies are about children lacking appropriate supervision." The link to neglect is clear. The fact that five-year-olds are being left alone or in the care of seven-year-olds regularly for periods in excess of an hour appears to document a link between the latchkey phenomenon and child neglect. Long and Long (1983) assert "that parents commonly believe that when a child reaches age eight, or about third grade, he or she is mature enough to handle self-care." If this is true, it is disturbing. It is disturbing in much the same way that the belief that physical punishment of children as young as six months of age is appropriate and necessary is disturbing (Belsky, 1980). Both beliefs seem to provide fertile ground in which maltreatment can flourish. Both high-risk beliefs increase the likelihood of child maltreatment occurring.

The link between the latchkey phenomenon and neglect seems clear, but what of abuse? Here too, the evidence leads to the disturbing conclusion that the latchkey phenomenon exacerbates the problem. First of all, latchkey children seem at special risk for

sexual and physical abuse at the hands of siblings. In their national survey of domestic violence, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found the highest level of domestic assault among siblings--48% vs. 14% by parents to children for the measure of "severe" violence. Finkelhor's Sexually Victimized Children (1979) reported comparable findings in the case of sexual abuse: siblings are more likely to be perpetrators than parents. It is clear from the accounts of latchkey children that when siblings are left alone, the odds of both physical and sexual assault increase. Research on latchkey children (Long & Long, 1983) is replete with cases to illustrate and document this.

Finally, the whole experience of being left alone, particularly when the child perceives the environment as being dangerous or the parent(s) as being unresponsive to his or her concerns, can constitute psychological maltreatment (Garbarino & Vondra, 1983). The First International Conference on Psychological Abuse and Neglect, held in 1983, defined psychological maltreatment as "rejecting," "isolating," "terrorizing," and "mis-socializing" children. Long and Long (1983) conclude that 20% of the latchkey children are "casualties" in that they suffer from long-lasting negative feelings and effects. Most of these children have experienced significant psychological maltreatment, perhaps in addition to physical and/or sexual abuse.

The professional community is split over the degree to which being a latchkey child exposes the child to serious risks. Rodman

(1984) for example, disputes the validity of the Longs' conclusions regarding the magnitude of damage. Where conditions are threatening and supportive services lacking, former Director of the Office of Child Development Edward Zigler's analysis (1983) seems correct in asserting that "latchkey arrangements represent a serious abdication of responsibility toward our nation's children." Where conditions are safe and the mature child is well-protected by supportive services, it may be appropriate to agree with Juvenile Court Judge Nanette Dembitz in recognizing that (at least in the case of a 13-year-old caring for siblings aged 10 and 8) "self-responsibility to this limited extent, in a family where parents show an overall affection and concern, may not only be harmless but beneficial."

However, so long as the financial and psychic needs of the parents are paramount in family decision-making, the risk of overestimating the child's capacities and underestimating the dangers will be great, particularly in the case of young children (younger than 10 years) and in threatening environments (such as urban apartments). The greatest risk lies in an economically pressed single-parent household or in a two-parent household in which two incomes are needed to meet aspirations for a more affluent material life style and/or for a more psychically fulfilling career for the mother. Both situations generate powerful incentives to believe that children can tolerate early self-care.

Would parents volunteer their children and themselves for the risks of being a latchkey child solely to secure the privilege of its presumed and potential benefits to the child? Few would. However, many parents believe they need the jobs that necessitate the latchkey experience for their children. As they see it, the family needs the job to preserve psychic peace (for the mother) and/or to preserve its standard of living. If fathers and mothers will not or cannot accommodate in such a situation then it is children who must adapt. Recent survey evidence (New York Times, 1983) indicates that women are highly committed to jobs outside the home in the cash economy. Men and women were asked, "If you are free to do either, would you prefer to have a job outside the home, or would you prefer to stay home and take care of your house and family?" Overall, 45% of women and 72% of men expressed a preference for a job outside the home. However, a majority (56%) of young women (18-29 years old), women who do work outside the home (58%), and women who have children and who work outside the home (50%) preferred the job over the home. The only majorities for preferring home over job were found among old women (65 or older) and conservative women (63% of who favored home). These figures are represented in the 62% of "nonworking women" and 50% of White women who favored home over job. In an interesting sort of backlash, women who do assume the full-time homemaker/mother role appear to be becoming more active in asserting the legitimacy of their situation and lifestyle choices. Evidence is to be found in

newspaper accounts of a Virginia-based support group called "Mothers at Home," and editorials about mothers at home who feel devalued and even exploited by "working mothers" (surely a redundancy if ever there was one). To cite one example, in her Newsweek "My Turn" column, Judy Paris (1983) reported on the many uses made of her availability as a full-time homemaker/mother by mothers who have jobs outside the home, uses that become abuses, as Paris sees it. In a more strident tone, Cynthia Hollander's (1983) "My Turn" takes to task mothers who take jobs to secure the income for a capital-intensive lifestyle when she reports them saying: "I would just love to spend the time with my own kids, but I just have to work." Then they straighten their new skirt, climb into their second car, and go home to a microwave dinner. I just smile and say, 'Bull.' We have each chosen what we value" (p. 11). Theories concerning the need for cognitive consistency and the reduction of dissonance (Festinger, 1957) predict that parents will hold views about children and childrearing that are consistent with the economic realities of day-to-day life. Thus, we can expect that women who hold jobs outside the home will be inclined to the view that being employed outside the home is consistent with being a "good mother," and that full-time homemakers will be less sympathetic to that view. The same New York Times survey cited earlier confirms this. While 68% of employed women thought employed mothers are as good mothers as mothers who do not work outside the home, 49% of those who do not work outside the home

agreed. Interestingly, whereas in 1970, 53% of the women polled named "being a mother and raising a family" and 43% named "being a homemaker," as one of the two or three "most enjoyable things about being a woman today," the comparable figures for 1983 were 26% and 8%. "Career, jobs, pay" and "general rights and freedoms" increased from 9% to 28% and from 14% to 32%, respectively. That these shifts are bound up in the economic polarization noted earlier is evident in Census Bureau data indicating the two incomes lift middle class families into the affluent range and prevent low income families from slipping into poverty (Garbarino, 1984). Families need working mothers, whether it be for affluence (two middle class workers), protection from low income (two blue collar workers), or sheer survival (a single parent). The economic facts of the matter predict that parents will believe that young children are capable of assuming early responsibility for self-care and that early maturity demands are in the child's best interests (and by implication there is something wrong with them if they cannot meet those demands). Observers like Elkind would reply that this is akin to what Ryan (1976) called "blaming the victim," because it inappropriately shifts the responsibility for a situation. In any case, the adults are taking the position that their families cannot afford to subsidize the child's experience of childhood.

Many parents believe they have few or no degrees of freedom. Women need to work. Despite evidence of some shift in traditional orientations to role division (Presser, 1984), few men are ready,

willing, and able to alter traditional patterns that define child care as the mother's responsibility regardless of her labor force participation (Cherlin, 1984). Indeed, castigating mothers for the latchkey phenomenon is also akin to "blaming the victim." Clearly men (or at least forms of sexism) are at the root of the problem in many cases, be it as separated fathers who fail to provide child support payments (a majority), inflexible resident fathers (a majority), unaccommodating work place managers (a majority), and unsympathetic policymakers (a majority, particularly during a "conservative" administration). As Cherlin (1984) concludes: "Thus, the destabilizing burden on employed wives seems to be rooted in an ideology of male and female roles that is resistant to change" (p. 435).

While there are programs in some communities to provide school-age day-care, supportive services for children in self-care, and flexible work schedules, most mothers are caught between a rock and a hard place as they attempt to juggle the role of worker and parent (whether they have a husband-father present or not). Children often offer the only manipulatable degrees of freedom in the situation.

This appears to be why some observers feel concerned about infants and preschool children who are in full-time day care, for example. Their parents do not have, or at least do not believe they can afford the luxury of giving the child and themselves the choice of being at home. They need the child to enter the most

inexpensive care. They need the child to manage well in care. Thus, for example, they need the child to attend school or the day-care setting as much as possible. Children may feel or be pressured to keep attending after they become sick or start attending again before they are well to make things work better for their parents. Popular writer for young people Beverly Cleary developed a set of characters in her books who exemplify the desirable essence of childhood, but who in recent years have come to speak for and about the dynamics of contemporary maturity demands. Her Huggins and Quimby families are archetypical American families, and it is thus significant that in her 1981 book Ramona Quimby, Age 8, 8-year-old Romona is besieged by worry that if she becomes sick at school it will interfere with her mother's work schedule. Ramona has entered the 1980s.

This imperative for the child to perform a role needed by the parents conflicts with the concept of childhood as directed by the child's needs and timetable, and reaches its critical point in the latchkey experience, where extreme maturity demands are often made in the name of family financial well-being and/or parental psychic needs.

This analysis suggests two important researchable interests for students of family dynamics and child development. First, what is the life-span value of childhood as it has evolved culturally in the modern era? Is it worth the substantial family investment required? Is it a necessary ingredient for producing well-adjusted

and competent children? Second, to what extent <u>are</u> children being deprived of childhood in the name of the financial and psychic needs of parents? How does social class generate and mediate these phenomena? Are current maturity demands premature and excessive? Do the risks outweigh the benefits in the same manner in different socioeconomic contexts? These lines of inquiry will illuminate the basic issue of whether or not childhood as we have known it at its best has become an unaffordable luxury for increasing numbers of American parents. Such research will also tell us whether or not we should be concerned about such a development. As always, we need to know not only what are the differences, but also what difference do, and will, the differences make.

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